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ABSTRACT

A study drew upon the oral and written texts of four fourth-grade, inner-city children to explore how writing functioned in transformative or political ways. Transformative or political aspects of writing involve the potential restructuring of power relations that exist between the writer and a variety of social or cultural spheres. Several interviews with each child over the school year and analysis of their statements and writings revealed that at times, writing provided the children with a means to make sense of their social worlds. At other times, it served as a vehicle through which they could explore more political terrains--envisioning new social identities and possible worlds for themselves, members of the communities and society. Rosa used writing to externalize difficult emotions and to create openings for new forms of social interaction with her peers that helped her to work through these emotions. Lisa's writing allowed her to understand and affirm her love of family and friends, to savor the experiences of being young, and to explore future societal roles and responsibilities. Anthony often used writing for political purposes--to make personal sense of difficult social problems, as well as to invite others to engage in dialogue that might result in greater understanding of the problems and conflicts apparent in his community and the larger society. Finally, Paul's writing consistently focused on relevant social and political problems that affected people both in his community and beyond. (Twenty-six references are attached.) (Author/PRA)

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TRANSFORMATIVE OR POLITICAL FUNCTIONS OF YOUNG CHILDREN'S WRITING

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RUNNING HEAD: TRANSFORMATIVE FUNCTIONS

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Abstract

In this article, we draw upon oral and written texts of four children for whom writing functioned in transformative or political ways. At times writing provided them with a means to make sense of their social worlds. At other times it served as a vehicle through which they could explore more political terrains -- envisioning new social identities and possible worlds for themselves, members of their communities, and society itself.

TRANSFORMATIVE AND POLITICAL FUNCTIONS OF YOUNG CHILDREN'S WRITING

Introduction

> *I picked up a pencil and held it over a sheet of paper, but my feelings stood in the way of my words. Well I would wait, day and night, until I knew what I wanted to say. Humbly now, with no vaulting dream of achieving a vast unity, I wanted to try to build a bridge of words between me and the world outside, the world which was so distant and elusive that it seemed unreal. (Richard Wright, 1944 p. 135)*

In this passage from his book, American Hunger, Richard Wright describes a moment of silence, a brief time when he was without appropriate words. He confesses his desire to use writing as a means of understanding and mediating his own experiences in relation to the wider world, and of the difficulty he once encountered in attempting to do so. His concern is with articulating his experiences, and in so doing, becoming conscious of his own presence and his relationship to others. He looks for a way of writing that might allow him to reveal himself to others while making sense of and even transforming his own way of being in the world (Greene, 1982).

Much like Richard Wright, the comments of 9-year-old Paul also underscore this meaning of writing and provide some initial insight into the transformative or political purposes that motivate children to write about issues relevant to themselves, their families and their communities. In an excerpt from one of many conversations we had with Paul about his writing, he told us how learning to write had changed him:

> I'm the same person, but I can write . . . I can write about something that happened to one of my family. I can write about it now, but back then I couldn't write about it. . . It makes a big difference to write because if you write about it and put it in a book, more people get to know about it. People that don't even know you. Like everybody can get the message that people over the world should stop using drugs . . . I can't go everywhere telling the people to stop using drugs. Maybe they'll stop crack houses, and that's good enough for me.

In this passage, Paul talks about the importance of finding words with which to make his experience known both to himself and to the world in which he lives. Indeed, with Paul we begin

to see some aspects of the transformative or political functions that underlie the writing he does -- his need to name the experiences which make up his life and to share his vision of social change with the wider world. Paul's comments appear to suggest that writing has helped him to discover a stance -- a new way of defining or "situating himself with respect to others and toward the world" (Bruner, 1986, p. 130). In addition, his comments begin to reflect evidence of the working relationship that young writers develop between language and their own lived experiences when they are engaged in more personal and socially relevant forms of writing (Britton, 1982).

These developments would appear to have implications for the kind of person Paul is capable of becoming. Assuming that this is true, these developments also suggest that we need to look more carefully at the possibilities that writing and learning to write might offer other young children who are also learning to live and understand their worlds (Gee, 1990; Giroux, 1988; Litowitz & Gundlach, 1985). In spite of these apparent possibilities, few formal studies have been designed to examine the kinds of visionary and transformative meanings that children attempt to construct through writing. Rather, most studies have explored the personal and social uses of children's writing, stopping short of trying to uncover more transformative or political functions.

Before describing what we intend to focus on in this article we will discuss briefly some of the research that has looked at these more personal and social functions of writing. Socially and culturally oriented researchers have demonstrated ways in which written language can be understood as a carrier of social relationships -- a means of intending or constructing certain kinds of social and cultural knowledge (e.g., Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Dyson, 1989; Heath, 1983; Giroux, 1988; Shuman, 1986; Taylor, 1988). From this perspective, written language has been regarded as a vehicle through which certain values, attitudes, beliefs, and standards of personal and community life are constructed and valorized.

Drawing primarily on the work of Sapir (1921) and Jakobson (1960) more rhetorically oriented researchers have focused on children's exploitation of the rhetorical possibilities of written language. In their pioneering work, Britton (1970) and Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, and Rosen (1975) found that writing was employed to accomplish three basic

rhetorical functions: expressive, transactional, and poetic. The most basic function and the earliest to develop was the expressive function. Both transactional language and poetic language evolved from or grew out of expressive language.

Since the work of Britton and his colleagues, many researchers have employed, criticized, and extended their theoretical scheme of writing functions. In addition to the expressive, transactional, and poetic functions, children have been reported to use writing for a variety of other purposes some of which were to experiment with the styles of particular authors or genres (e.g., Gundlach, 1981; Whale & Robinson, 1978), to frame or mark an event to make it more important or business-like (e.g., Fiering, 1981; Shuman, 1986), to control public interaction in order to get the floor, make a public statement, or control access to events (e.g., Fiering, 1981; Shuman, 1986), to substitute for oral messages either because of the absence of a receiver, prohibitions against oral transmission, or embarrassment involved in oral transmission (e.g., Fiering, 1981; Litowitz & Gundlach, 1985; Shuman, 1986), and to affirm one's identity, one's sense of personal history, or attributive propositions about one's self (e.g., Clark & Florio, 1982; Dyson, 1989; Litowitz & Gundlach, 1985; Newkirk, 1989; Shuman, 1986).

The empirical research on the functions of writing employed by children clearly demonstrates that they use writing for a variety of purposes that far exceed those initially proposed by Britton and his colleagues. Yet, most of this research has not really tapped the transformative or political functions of the writing done by many children. Since many theorists have recently disccused the transformative or political possibilities of writing under a variety of headings (e.g., critical literacy, political literacy, and the new literacy), we feel that it is important to define what we mean by these terms. Transformative or political uses of writing are those uses that aim to restructure power relations that exist between writers and a variety of social or cultural spheres -- immediate social relationships, local community relationships, relationships with local and mainstream culture, and relationships with societal institutions.

As we have already suggested, while little research has explored transformative or political functions of writing, there is a wealth of theoretical literature to support explorations of

this sort. Britton (1982), for example, has suggested that written language can be a vehicle for reconstructing and shaping experience. Similarly, Bruner (1990) has proposed that the stories we compose "mediate between the canonical world of culture and the more idiosyncratic world of beliefs, desires, and hopes" (p. 52). In addition, a number of theorists and researchers from within the growing field of critical literacy (e.g., Ferdman, 1990; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Gee, 1990; Giroux, 1988; Scollon, 1988; Willinsky, 1990) have emphasized that literacy is not only the ability to understand the conceptual content of written texts, but also the means through which individuals' understanding of themselves and their relationships to the world are progressively enlarged. Literacy, in this more critical sense, engages individuals in dialogues between themselves and their experienced worlds, not only to understand and transform their own experiences, but also to reconstruct their relationships with the wider society (Giroux, 1988). To exercise literacy in this sense is to recognize it as a form of social practice -- a way of constituting oneself in relation to others and as a means of understanding and negotiating the social and cultural relationships that one believes to be desirable in the wider society. According to Giroux (1988), critical uses of literacy have the potential to expand the range of social identities that students might embody as they attempt to situate themselves and others in histories and narratives that mobilize and revitalize their hopes for the future.

Toward understanding the political possibilities of children's writing

In order to explore the extent to which children use writing for transformative or political purposes, we have been working with many young writers and their teachers for the past several years. This work began with some very general questions: How would students respond to the invitation to write about their own experience and the communities in which they live? In what way might such writing help children to make sense of their everyday experiences? How might children use writing while attempting to construct and reconstruct personal identities? Finally, how might writing be used by children to participate in the process of envisioning, exploring, and shaping new forms of community life? Over the years, the talk and text of the children with whom

we have been involved have often surprised us -- refining and deepening our understanding of how children use writing in transformative or political ways.

The "Writer's Community"

In this article, we draw upon the writing and our conversations with four particular children (Rosa, Lisa, Anthony, and Paul) as we explore and discuss how children instantiate political or transformative purposes in their school-based writing. Although these four children wrote stories and essays that embodied a range of rhetorical functions, their more political pieces are especially relevant to the points we hope to address here. It is important to note that the writing we have chosen to feature in this article is not necessarily the most politically oriented writing produced by children with whom we have worked. Indeed, over the course of the year, we have collected writing that has ranged from having little or no political function to being more politically charged than much of the writing that we highlight in this article.

The four children whose writing we discuss in this article were part of a larger, year-long collaborative teacher-researcher project in a fourth-grade classroom in an inner-city elementary school which drew its students from the surrounding neighborhood -- a community rich in African-American culture with strong economic ties to the auto industry. The children's teacher, Victoria Rybicki, invited us to collaborate with her in constructing a whole language writing program that accented the transformative possibilities that writing might offer her students. In her search for a writing program that would celebrate the voices of children -- voices that she believed teachers must listen to and encourage -- Vicki saw a need for children to participate in the shaping of their language arts class and to become active language users. In order to meet this goal, we designed a program with Vicki that invited the children in the classroom to write about themselves, their families, and their communities. We believed that these topics -- as opposed to topics more commonly assigned in language arts curricula -- would create occasions for children to use writing for more transformative or political purposes.

We began this new writing program by helping the children to plan and conduct a neighborhood tour during which they introduced us to their community by identifying and

commenting upon a variety of local landmarks that had particular meaning for them (e.g., churches, homes of relatives and friends, favorite restaurants, parks, abandoned homes, and local hang-outs). Throughout the tour, the children provided extensive commentary on the sites they had selected to show us. Interestingly, this commentary included historical information about featured landmarks, as well as information about the personal, communal, and political significance of these sites. Much of this information became the subject of children's early writing.

As the year progressed, Vicki and her students made various changes that reflected their changing views of writing and the writing process. At the front of the room, the students created an "author's chair" where students could share their writing with the whole class. In addition, the students set up a sharing corner (a carpeted and pillowed area enclosed on three sides by cabinets and decorative walls and designed for sharing writing), and a writing corner (a long table that seated four or five students, who often quietly wrote and discussed each other's writing as they worked). In addition, student writers often chose to work collaboratively in adjacent desks around the room, frequently sharing and discussing their writing with one another.

In addition to changes in the classroom environment and writing practices initiated by the students, Vicki made several changes to accommodate the new writing program. She set up several filing cabinets for children's writing folders: one folder for unfinished pieces and one folder for finished pieces She placed open bins of lined and unlined paper on top of the filing cabinets, along with scissors, glue and other materials that might be used for editing drafts. Finally, she designated certain areas of the room as resource centers for paperback books and dictionaries.

As the year progressed, students decided to call their class the "Writers' Community." Within this community, they wrote and shared writing on a wide range of personal and community-related topics. Often this writing was inspired by their self-selected reading, friendships and family ties that they wished to affirm, current events related to their own historical and cultural identities (e.g., Nelson Mandela's visit to America; Black History Month; the public television documentary, Eyes on the Prize), and visits by prominent local figures in educational and political life (e.g., the director of The Center for Afro-American and African Studies at a local university).

A portion of each child's writing was published in a small student anthology at the end of the school year.

In addition to participating in the many activities of the "Writer's Community," the four children that we showcase in this article were interviewed several times throughout the year. In each of these interviews we focused on the political functions that writing served in their lives. Over the course of the year, we came to know these children well. As we read their work and listened to them talk during the interviews, we came to understand more fully those aspects of their communities and their lives that they sought to affirm and embrace, as well as those aspects they wished to change or transform. As others before us have noted (e.g., Dyson, 1989; Gundlach, 1982), the talk and text produced by Rosa, Lisa, Anthony, and Paul reveal that children do indeed use writing as a form of individual expression, sense-making, and problem solving. However, in talking to them and reading their texts, we also learned how children use oral and written language for transformative purposes as well. Like fellow members of the "Writer's Community," the writing and talking in which Rosa, Lisa, Anthony, and Paul engaged served as powerful vehicles for thinking about and negotiating the forms of social and political life that they envisioned as possible and desirable. The voices reflected in their texts are sometimes nascent and polyphonic, presumably reflecting their own struggles for some set of coherent understandings of complex social, cultural, and political issues. Yet their voices remain hopeful and directed toward understanding themselves and the roles and responsibilities they might assume as members of the society in which they live.

The children and their texts

For each of the children whose comments and texts we will discuss, writing functioned in transformative ways, at times providing them with the means to make sense of their social worlds while at other times serving as the vehicle through which they explored more political terrains -- envisioning new roles and possible worlds for themselves and other members of their communities.

We begin with Rosa as she discusses how she came to write the piece she called *My Mom* and how the story functioned in her life. Among the things that we find particularly intriguing

about Rosa is how she uses writing to externalize difficult emotions and to create openings for new forms of social interaction with her peers that help her to work through those emotions. Next, we listen to Lisa whose vision of family and community life is embodied in her essay *Living in the Black Life*. In this piece she envisages possible worlds for herself, others, and for society, while remaining naively yet painfully aware of past and present social injustices. Then we hear from Anthony, who writes and reflects upon the problem of handguns in his community appealing to his audience to engage in dialogue that might help him understand the uses and misuses of handguns in society. Finally, we listen to Paul as he talks about his essay *Enslaved*. Especially interesting are Paul's sense of joy at thinking about himself as a writer, the importance of self-expression through writing that he has come to believe in, and his perceptions about the potential power of the written word to transform social meanings and practices.

Rosa. Rosa was a very quiet and soft spoken student who rarely voiced her opinion in discussions and interactions which occurred as part of the instructional activities of the day. In spite of her reluctance to join in class discussions, she had many friends who, in addition to her family members, frequently became the subject of much of her writing. Rosa's writing tended to function at a personal and social level as a vehicle for identifying and establishing the importance she associated with peer friendship and the love she felt for family members. Indeed, in what became Rosa's most emblematic work, *My Mom*, the theme of family love is central. In *My Mom*, Rosa attempts to affirm and strengthen the love she feels for her mother as she describes a visit to the Ice Capades on her birthday and the auto accident that took place on their way home. Interestingly, it is the memory of these events through which she verifies and makes sense of her feelings for her mother – feelings that became particularly significant for Rosa in light of the auto accident and subsequent injury that her mother had sustained.

My Mom

My mom is very sweet she treats me special. We have so many great times together like today. We went to the Ice Capades me and my family. We saw so many great things.

We saw Mario and Luigi. We felt the ice. We saw Barbie in real life. We have so many great times together.

One day on my birthday we had an accident and I was crying. My mom was going to K-mart to get me a toy. And then some car came and hit her. They hit my mom and family. We all went up the hill. My mom said we all was very lucky that we didn't get hurt and that the car did not tip over and that we did not die. Thank you God we love you. Mom you are the greatest mom anyone can have. Love you.

While Rosa's affection for her mother is clearly revealed in her story, our conversations with her provided additional insight into the important ways in which the piece functioned in her life, both as a means to externalize and make sense of problematic emotions and as a way to restructure social relationships in order to enlist the support of others in dealing with her own feelings of guilt regarding the events of that day. In Rosa's words:

> [I wrote the story] because I felt like getting it out. Getting this part out. The part about my momma and her getting . . . My mom, we all, about how they hit my momma badly. Because every time it was, everyday, I would wake up and think of it [the accident]. Then I was for sure I was gonna write about my mother and all my feelings.
>
> It [writing about the accident] helped. It helped me to learn that, it helped me to learn that the day that my mother got hurt that she would be all right, 'cause she was telling me that she would be all right . . . I thought it was my fault, because my momma was going somewhere to get me something. And then my auntie, and my cousins and my mother, and my little baby brother even told me that it wasn't my fault. [After I wrote] I felt like it wasn't any of my fault, really. It was just slippery, and the car slipped into us because it was, we was goin' down a hill and this other car was turning, and then my mother stopped, and then the [other] car came, and then we all went up the hill.

These comments clearly reveal how Rosa used writing as a political vehicle -- as a way to transform her own emotions, as well as her relationships with her mother and other family members. Thinking that the accident was her fault, Rosa's intention was to use writing to affirm or

reconstruct in writing her relationship with her mother and the feelings of love she felt had been threatened as a result of the crash:

> It [writing the story] made me feel good. I didn't think of it too much anymore about how it happened and I was so scared. It helped me think of my mother as always there for me when I need her, and it brought to me how it feels. [If someone else reads it] I would like them to know that me and my mom have great times together. And my family, that we spend lots of time together. It's important to me because I like telling about my mother a lot, and how I would like a lot of people to know about that.

In addition to using writing to transform her own feelings and her relationships with family members, Rosa also used writing as a way to extend the boundaries and nature of her relationships with her teacher and her peers, creating a network of support that had not previously existed. Her political intentions became clear as she explained why she did not explicitly mention her guilt about the auto accident in her story, but how she felt that sharing her story might provide her with opportunities to do so:

> I was thinking about putting that part in, but when I thought, I thought that people, some people would say "I don't know why she would put it in, or something, why she would want to put all of her private life in." I thought I'd put something in; I thought it wasn't too private because I just felt guilty. People in my class were telling me things. I decided not to put that in, but my friends were telling me "no matter what they say, its up to you."
>
> We have a little corner [a "sharing corner" in the classroom] where we read each other's stories and say stuff . . . I thought when people started talking [about my story] . . . I thought people in my class . . . I have a lot of friends and I thought they would help me figure, help me out with my problem.
>
> When I had written the story, you know, I felt that it wasn't really my fault because my mother and Mrs. Rybicki and other people [peers] read it and talked to me and told me that it wasn't my fault. And I started thinking that it wasn't my fault either.

These comments indicate that Rosa was both conscious of her decision to avoid mentioning anything about her feelings of guilt with regard to the accident and aware of how her written piece might function as an invitation for members of her class to help her share some of these problematic feelings. Indeed, Rosa's engagement in writing and talking about her story was political, functioning both to transform her own emotional response to the auto accident and to help her redefine and deepen her relationships with her family members, her teacher, and her peers.

Lisa. Although a relatively shy young girl, much of Lisa's writing often reflected a strong sense of love, confidence, and optimism about herself, her family, and about the community in which she lived. Throughout the school year, Lisa's writing frequently served the purposes of allowing her to understand and affirm her love of family and friends, to savor the experiences of being young, and to explore future societal roles and responsibilities. In the opening lines of a rather long piece entitled *My Life*, which chronicled her experiences as a child growing up with her family, Lisa's voice emerged as one of affirmation, confidence, and resolve with respect to the future of her own life and the love of her family:

My Life

> *My life is very dependable. I will not destroy it. My life is ok. When I grow up I want to graduate from high school and go to the army and go to college and be a police women . . .*

Later, in a description of her cousin and their summer relationship, Lisa continues to use writing to describe and affirm a world in which friendship and the prospect of her own future remain bright:

> *When my cousin came over for the summer we always fight then make-up then we go skating or go to bible class. We have a lot of fun together they told me new things. We played hard games and Hide-go-see, cop and robber. I got in trouble a lot but I don't mind. As my life goes on I get happier and happier . . .*

In this piece, as in others, Lisa consistently uses writing to celebrate a world in which family togetherness, friendship, and the importance of being young and living a child's life remain paramount. However, as Lisa grew more comfortable with writing about her community and her

life, she produced many more pieces that also functioned as a way to explore the future roles and responsibilities she envisioned for herself and others in the wider world. For example, in her piece, *Living In The Black Life,* Lisa's writing reveals a new set of more complex political functions. Albeit somewhat naively, she attempts to resolve the tensions and conflicts she perceives to exist between Blacks and Whites:

Living in the Black Life

It is nice living in the Black life. I haven't been harmed in the city. Back then Black was treated bad and beaten and spat at. But right now it is better and I am happy that I am living in the Black life. Some people don't like living in the Black life. Back then White people hated Blacks but now White people really like Blacks. We communicate with each other but it is a wonderful life being Black. And I don't hate for being Black and other Blacks shouldn't hate being Black. They should be happy who they are, and no matter what Whites do to Blacks we are good people still.

So love who you are don't hate yourself and thank God for making you a person. It don't matter if your White or Black, just know who you are. So living in the Black life is good to live.

In this essay, to which Lisa attached much importance, she envisions a particular set of social practices and political relations in which people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds live in harmony and where individuals celebrate their personal and cultural identities. In addition, Lisa represents herself as one whose confidence and hopes for her own future, as well as for the future others are based in a history characterized by struggles involving racial tension and conflict. Although under-developed in her essay, conversations with Lisa revealed that her rhetorical intention was grounded in an historical perspective that provided a basis from which both Lisa and her readers could be mobilized to resolve such tensions and conflicts in their own lives and in the wider world. Reflecting upon the opening of *Living in the Black Life,* Lisa discloses her historical knowledge of inter-group conflict in the United States that inspired her vision of racial harmony and personal, cultural pride:

I wrote about how Black life was, and how it is now, and how it was then and stuff . . . [I wanted people to know] about the history of Black people, and stuff like that. The history in the story, and umm, how, how it's like, and stuff like that. How it's like in the Black life. History. [When people read it] they'll learn something about how it was back then. Probably people want to know how I knew about how it was back then, and I just wanted to tell 'em how it was back then in a Black life . . . So I want people to see how Blacks stayed together. So I hope they [readers] can understand what I meant, that a person should love who they are and people should stay together. But it's gonna be a struggle.

The transformative meanings regarding social injustice and self-respect that Lisa assigns to her writing are further corroborated by her comments in a later conversation in which she described the origin of her ideas for *Living in the Black Life.*

My cousin gave me a suggestion to write about Blacks and how they were treated. And Mrs. Rybicki was reading us stories about how some White people didn't like Blacks and how some Blacks didn't like themselves. So I thought of some ideas . . . That's why I wrote my story. Some of it was in the 1950s. Some of it was in the 1850s. In the [1950s] was Alabama and stuff like that, and some was in the 1800s, about like Harriet Tubman. All . . . a lot of blacks were treated bad, like Martin Luther King was treated bad. Harriet Tubman and all other Black Americans were treated badly.

I was trying to tell the world don't hate who you are . . . don't hate being Black. My mother said that my great grandma, she didn't like being Black. She wished she was White so people wouldn't beat on her 'cause she was a slave back then. But she got free and she wished she was White so she wouldn't have to be hurt during the troubles. If some people don't like being Black, don't hate being Black 'cause God made you a happy person. So be happy with who you are. A White person could have that message if they don't like themself . . . So don't hate who you are and thank God for being alive whatever color you are. I want the world to know that.

Lisa's comments provide insight into some of the ways that this particular piece of writing functioned in her life. Her remarks demonstrate the transformative possibilities that she envisions through writing -- possibilities that allow her to imagine a world that she would like to construct for herself, for others, and for her community. Lisa's remarks also provide insight into the more public message she hopes others will hear -- one that emphasizes the importance of loving who you are irrespective of color or culture, as well as the importance of celebrating cultural and racial difference. Importantly, it was the knowledge of past events involving the unfair treatments of Blacks that mobilized her to instantiate these political functions in her writing. In addition, this historical perspective served as a point of reference for explaining how "living in the Black life" had changed and improved over time, a perspective consistent with Lisa's already hopeful stance. In sum, Lisa's writing served as a form of social and political practice that provided her with a way to participate in the process of exploring and constituting the social and cultural relations as well as the forms of everyday life that she finds possible and desirable.

Anthony. Seldom quiet or shy, Anthony frequently voiced his thoughts and opinions in class discussions. He became especially animated and articulate when these discussions focused on significant social issues and events in the surrounding community or beyond. Not surprisingly, Anthony often used writing for political purposes -- to make personal sense of difficult social problems, as well as to invite others to engage in dialogue that might result in greater understanding of the problems and conflicts apparent in his community and the larger society. In our discussion, we focus on a text Anthony entitled *Guns* along with the reflections about this text that he shared with us during several interviews. As his comments during an early brainstorming session revealed, Anthony's desire to write about handgun violence was rooted in his own personal experiences in his neighborhood. Faced with the prospect of writing about guns and violence, Anthony struggled to find a voice that would be both truthful and socially responsible:

Sometimes around our corner, like on Jameel's street . . . drug dealers . . . like every time I hear someone is shot I think about my story. Should I write that in my story? Should I write that this person got killed? Should I write that in my story? Stuff like that.

As he continued to talk about the piece he wanted to write, it became apparent that Anthony's primary purpose was to negotiate an alternative set of social meanings with respect to guns and violence. More specifically, Anthony's purpose was to provide a vision of a world in which meaningful social dialogue might result in an end to handgun violence:

Like I thought I should write a whole bunch about guns because uh like the police don't even know what to do about guns. Police don't know about guns. What should they do? Should they put the people in jail or [let them] have guns in their house? It's probably all right to have guns in the house if you . . . no wait . . . if you know how to use them. So I think it's going to be like a good story that people can read.

It [my story] might help people. Like if their mothers have guns or if their fathers have guns, like uh the kids can sit around and talk to them like "we shouldn't use it" because you shouldn't use it that way, and other stuff about guns. I want police officers to read it. Like if a police officer reads it I think they'll say this is a good story. I want him to come to us and tell us what we should DO! Like uh, if it is all right with the gun . . .

When Anthony finally wrote *Guns*, the voice he adopted remained emergent and polyphonic, reflecting the ambivalence he had expressed while formulating his ideas. At the same time, however, Anthony remained committed to using writing as a means of encouraging meaningful discussions aimed at finding a solution to handgun violence:

Guns

Guns are nothing to fool around with. Parents should hide guns away from children. Children shouldn't play around with guns anyway. So I think guns is no good at all. Some people have guns in our neighborhood. We can do something about it. I will do my best and to try my best to stop the guns in my neighborhood. I will guarantee you it will stop. It will stop!

It is a time to use guns. When you are a police officer it is OK to use guns. Guns do kill people but sometimes when people are used to guns they are lucky and don't get hurt. Some police get shot when they are on duty. That is so, so, so sad when they get shot on purpose.

Why is guns bad to our children? Some people think guns are for safety. I think guns are for protection. Some people sell drugs to get guns. I think guns is just a piece of trash. But if it wasn't for weapons people wouldn't get killed. But some people ask for peace but so you think they get it when they use guns? What do you think?

Throughout *Guns*, Anthony struggles to integrate a variety of political stances toward guns. In the beginning of his text, his position is one of confidence and resolve. He promises his audience that he will "stop the guns." As he develops his argument, however, Anthony expresses his understanding of the political complexity associated with the handgun issue, noting, for example, that "it is a time to use guns" and that "some people think guns are for safety." With this issue of handguns still unresolved, Anthony concludes his text with a question. In effect, this question is a plea to his audience to help him and the members of his community sort out what has become a confusing political dilemma.

The ambivalence that characterizes Anthony's essay was also evident in his responses to interview questions about his reasons for writing the piece. Moreover, these responses partially revealed the source of his ambivalence. Anthony's writing had become a site for attempting to reconcile the many conflicting political alignments toward handguns that were held by several important people in his community -- his grandfather who was a retired police officer, his teacher who advocated non-violence, and members of his neighborhood block club who were struggling to improve conditions in their community.

In addition to using writing to try to reconcile these disparate points of view, Anthony viewed his writing as having a more public purpose. He believed that writing had the potential to transform community values and practices. In his own words:

I'm trying to get across that guns . . . are nothin' to be messin' with. Like, I wanted to sort a' like change peoples' minds about guns . . . cause if they don't want to die, and they be messin' around with guns so they like "want to die," 'cause they be messin around with 'em and they can kill 'em. And I just wanted to change their mind. But I don't think it's changed any minds, nobody's mind –YET! Maybe it did, maybe it didn't, but I . . . But I don't think it changed anybody's mind yet. But like they might see our book [the student anthology] sitting there, and they might look at my page, and they might read it and they might get interested in it. And they might, GET IT, and read it.

Paul. Paul moved cautiously in articulating his thoughts and feelings in writing. Yet, from the beginning, it was clear that he wanted his voice to be heard; he frequently expressed his opinions and thoughts about a wide range of social and political issues related to life in his community. Perhaps more than any other student, Paul's writing consistently focused on relevant social and political problems that affected people both in his community and beyond. Indeed, from the outset, Paul's writing served as a personal reminder to himself and his readers of the changes he had observed in the neighborhood around his home. In his first written text, *The Park,* he describes the neighborhood park he remembers, as well as the new and more ominous park it had become:

The Park [1]

There was a park. The park was a place for boys and girls to play. but the gang came smoking pot. So then the kids stop come to the park and then the gang came. The police come to look out so the park can stay clean. But the park never

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[1]Most of the children's texts discussed in this article were culled from a student anthology published at the end of the school year. With the help of a peer "editorial board" the student writers had the oppotunity to revise these texts substantially. This particular text and the text entitled *The Gas Station* were never published and did not undergo revision and editing beyond the first draft. To make the essay easier to read, we have taken the liberty to correct invented spellings and to add some punctuation; we have not, however, altered the grammar of these pieces in any way.

stay clean. The kids like me and you can't go to the park. This is not fair to the kids like me. I hope this will stop soon.

In *The Park* Paul's more political orientation toward events in his life is clear. Paul's voice stands out as one of concern and nascent activism regarding the future of his community. On one level, Paul's writing functions as a vehicle for making sense of the changes he observed in the park. On another level, however, Paul's text functions politically to notify others about changes that he sees as detrimental to community life. As such, his writing serves as a vehicle through which readers might reflect upon the present park in relation to the park it had once been, perhaps being mobilized to make changes that would restore the park to a place "where boys and girls [could] play [again]."

In another text that Paul wrote entitled *The Gas Station,* he once again expresses his vision of a society in which the safety of children and productive community change remain paramount. In this text, which includes mention of gangs and violence, Paul describes a local gas station that had been destroyed but was being rebuilt and would again function as a vital neighborhood business.

The Gas Station

There was a gas station on First Street. It is blown up. I think it was a gang that did it. But they are fixing it up. It will be open soon. The gang threw the smoke bomb and the gang ran away. I don't know why they did it. I guess they did it because the gang was selling drugs. The gangs are messing up the city. The police are looking for them. They are going to find them. They are wild and mad. If you see them call the police 911 . . .

A year later the gas station was ready for business. People they fixed all the things that needed to be fixed like the station itself. When I ride past I see cars going in and I see cars going out.

As with *The Park,* Paul's writing functions to connect past events with a social situation in the present. Interestingly, this is marked by a shift from the past tense of "[t]here was a gas station" to the present tense of "they are fixing it up." The relation between the gas station he once

knew, its subsequent destruction, and the renovation it underwent functions to remind people of the possibility of community change and improvement.

While Paul's inclination to use writing to envision community change is clearly present in *The Park* and *The Gas Station*, the political purposes that motivate his writing are most apparent in an essay he entitled *Enslaved*. As our conversations with Paul revealed, he came to regard this text as emblematic of how writing could be used to transform social practices and ideologies. Much like Lisa, Paul makes use of his knowledge of African-American history to draw a parallel between the institution of slavery and the effects of the drug culture on African-American youth today. He begins with a discussion of slavery and its influence on family life. Next, he discusses the struggles of some prominent African-American figures to achieve freedom for their people. Finally, he delivers the powerful political message that drugs are threatening the freedom that African-Americans have sought so hard to win.

Enslaved

Slavery was unfair because they was beaten and taken from their family. And I bet that the hardest part is to be taken away from your family because they took care of you since you was born. And most of the white people did not care about how the slaves felt. Those white people was too lazy and they wanted to take the slaves from their home in Africa.

All the slaves was on a ship. The ship was no bigger than the classroom. The slaves was dying because if somebody got sick then the others will get sick and they will die too. When they made it to the south they was to sign a contract to do service for twenty years but they got tricked to serve for life! I don't think that is fair, do you? But that's how it was.

Now, I want to tell you about Nelson Mandela. He was a leader in Africa. He showed them the right way for a long time. Then he went to court and lost the case and he was in jail for twenty-seven years. He's out now in 1990. He is all around the world. I'm glad he's out to turn the idea of Blacks getting along with Whites the right way.

Now I want to tell you about Harriet Tubman. I learned this in a book and in a story that my teacher read to our class. Harriet was a slave since she was 4 years old. She had to take care of

one, two, and three year olds when she was only four or five years old herself. And if she didn't do right she will get beaten with a belt or whip. When she got older she would get locked in a box for a lot of hours or for a day. I know Harriet was treated bad but the White people didn't have no feeling for slaves. They had no feeling for slaves. All they wanted was they house to get cleaned and some of the slaves didn't no how to read. Some of the slaves had to sneak to learn to read.

Back to the story. The part I didn't like was when she had got hit in the head with a weight. She was out for a week then she was not feeling right. Nobody wanted her but she started the underground railroad. She made it to the free side but she was not happy because she was thinking about her family. She went back to the South to free her family. She tricked everybody on the south side and they wanted her dead or alive but they cannot find her but her and her family was free.

But you are still a slave to drugs because drugs can make you a slave. Say like I was on drugs I will be a slave. Because drugs is telling me what to do. Drugs can be harmful. There are steroids crack pot week alcohol and cigarette. Back to the point how can drugs effect your life. They can kill you, in a day or probably a week. I don't see why people do drugs it's killing our city. People killing each other over crack. You are an addict to crack. You're robbing and killing smoking and dealing. Crack is stupid. But people think it is fun, and they get high off it. It's making people go and kill other people. Because drugs is telling them what to do. I hope that the world will stop killing because I don't want my family don't get killed over drugs. Because I will die before my family.

In this essay, Paul uses writing to instantiate three related political functions. First, he wants to underscore the importance of the family in providing basic material needs, emotional support, care, and love. He develops this point by describing how slavery disrupted and even destroyed many African-American families and how Harriet Tubman struggled to free her family and her people. Second, Paul seeks to stress the need to achieve racial harmony. To give substance to this idea, he draws upon the politics of Nelson Mandela and his visit to America and other nations. Third, Paul wants to alert his audience to the dangers inherent in drug abuse, dangers that

could threaten individual freedom as well as family cohesion. He delivers this warning with rhetorical effectiveness by drawing a parallel between the historical institution of slavery and the present-day potential of drugs to enslave its users.

These three political functions were central to Paul's use of language and literacy, surfacing time and time again in our conversations with him. In a set of comments culled almost at random from our interview transcripts, Paul outlines these functions:

> In my story I think I was trying to explain, to say something about the family [in times of slavery], because they took care of you, fed you, clothed you, had a house, had a roof over our heads. And then all of a sudden somebody would come and take it all away from you and have you working out in a corn field somewhere. I was thinking about like what if my aunt and uncles were in this position, of being a slave, or my grandma or grandmother, or my grandmother's mother, or mother. . .
>
> First I wrote my feelings to show other people how it was . . . to show kids how it was back before our parents were born, and before we were born. And I wrote it mostly so they can get around prejudiced people like the Ku Klux Klan. We can turn around, and we can join each other. It's like this because the color of our skin. Like if we take off our skin, we both look . . . if we take off our skin, we look the same way. . .
>
> When someone reads my story I like them to think about it. And if they're on drugs, I'd like them to think about it and see how they could turn theyself around, and become a normal person like my uncle. Um-hmm, its like a new version of slavery. What if drugs is telling you to do and stuff. And you gonna do it! It's a different version. It's still the same. You could get like addicted to it and then you could do like stupid stuff 'cause it's telling you what to do . . .
>
> Like, I wrote my story because I don't want anyone in my family to use drugs, cause my uncle he was using drugs, but he helped his self. He went to this clinic and he stayed there for a couple of . . . he stayed there for five months. Now he only smokes cigarettes.

He don't drink nothin'. He recovered his self. And he be at meetings and stuff, and he's havin' speeches and stuff. They can't be doin' it anymore, and stuff like that.

In *Enslaved* and in related conversations, Paul presents a new and transformative vision to his audience. As with Lisa and Anthony, writing for Paul became a way of assuming a social identity directed toward finding solutions to social problems that he saw were eroding his family, his community, and society itself.

Transformative or political functions of writing : What we learned from the children

We began this article by suggesting that the transformative or political functions of children's writing have not been explored sufficiently. We defined these functions as ones that involve the potential restructuring of power relations that exist between writers and a variety of social or cultural spheres -- immediate social relationships, local community relationships, relationships with local and mainstream culture, and relationships with societal institutions. We thought that without an understanding of these functions we stood to miss important aspects children's literacy development. As the children wrote and talked about their families, their communities, and their lives, we came to realize that we had initially underestimated the rich and diverse ways that they would use writing for transformative or political purposes. Indeed, our involvement with children in the "Writer's Community" helped us to contextualize our initial theoretical notions about the transformative possibilities of children's writing. For example, Rosa and Anthony provided us with insight into how writing can function to make sense of difficult social issues and to transform problematic emotions rooted in social relationships. Rosa also showed us how writing can be used to restructure social relationships to elicit understanding and support from a wider range of people, and Anthony demonstrated how writing can be used to promote dialogue aimed at solving complex social problems. From Lisa, Anthony, and Paul we learned about how writing can be used to envision new social practices and political relations that might contribute to solving community and societal ills. Finally, these same three children helped us to understand how writing can be used to explore new social identities, roles, and responsibilities.

The transformative or political uses of writing demonstrated by Rosa, Lisa, Anthony, and Paul have important implications for classroom practice. As we think back upon the year during which we worked with these four children, we are struck by the simplicity of the program that helped to bring forth their voices. Indeed, Vicki was right about the value of listening to and celebrating children's voices. She was also right about the importance of allowing children to participate in the shaping of their language arts program. Fortunately, our decision to invite children to make their own lives and experiences the subject of their school-based writing proved to be a good instructional choice – one that did indeed encourage children to view writing as a form of social/political practice. Beginning the new writing program with a neighborhood tour during which children introduced us to their community was also a fortuitous instructional choice. The tour provided an anchor for much of the writing , thinking and social dialogue that was to follow. Finally, providing children with a forum for discussing, reworking, and eventually publishing their texts proved to be an important motivational element of the "Writer's Community," helping to sustain the excitement and energy with which it began.

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